1.3.2. Devito's Postulates of Communication

As we begin our discussion to understand the basic components of studying communication, I wanted to first share Devito’s Postulates of Communication.

Devito first asserts that communication is a transactional process. The process is collaborate and features a give and take between the sender and receiver. Early communication research framed the process as linear – the sender sent a message to the receiver, and that’s as far as the process went. However, more contemporary views of communication take into account that as a message is sent, the receiver is also sending a message to the sender, a concept known as feedback. So the communication process is transactional and dynamic.

Secondly, Devito asserts that communication is inevitable. We cannot NOT communicate. Think about if you’ve ever given someone the silent treatment; most likely you are trying to communicate that you are angry or upset with that person by not overtly communicating with him or her. But even if we try to avoid communicating with someone, the act of not communicating with that person sends a message. So all of our actions send messages; there is meaning in all behaviors, so communication is always happening, whether we intend it or not.

Devito’s third postulate is that communication is irreversible. Once we have made an utterance or acted in some way, the message that the language or action sent is in the environment, and we cannot take it back. We may certainly try to amend the message, and sometimes we can, but we are unable to completely erase the fact that something was said or some action was taken. For instance, if you’ve ever served on a jury or witnessed a juried trial, you may have heard the judge strike a statement from the record and instruct the jury to disregard what was said. Even though that comment will not be in the official court record, the jury has still heard the message and on some level may very well be influenced by that information simply because they have been exposed to it. In the video clip featured on this slide, you’ll see many politicians who *wish* their communication was reversible.

Next, Devito asserts that communication is a package of signals. This references all the components and cues that accompany a message. Not only do we derive meaning from the actual words spoken, but we also take meaning from the nonverbal cues including how is a message is uttered, what a person’s facial expressions may convey, what time of the day or night

the message is sent or said, and the list goes on with regards to how a message gains significance. We are probably all aware of how difficult and even risky it is to send an email or text message that is intended to be either humorous or sarcastic. It's risky because, without the nonverbal cues or perhaps a wink or a smile, a sarcastic message may be perceived as rude if the receiver ONLY has the verbal component to decode. Additionally – consider the way a message is sent (for instance face to face vs. text) – this also is part of the package that is considered when decoding a message. As we'll see in a minute, if your significant other breaks up with you through a post-it note vs. face to face can significantly affect the way you feel about the action taking place. You may not like the break up part either way, but the post it note route may seem so much more impersonal and doesn't allow you the opportunity to ask why or provide any feedback than if your significant other took the time to tell you face to face.

The 5th postulate speaks to the complexity of communication messages based on who the send and receiver may be. Communication involves both content and relationship dimensions. For instance, "Let's go back to your place" may hold different meaning s based on who utters the message. The content dimension refers to the actual, literal message sent – in this case, let's leave this location and go to where you live. The relationship dimension would speak to how to further decode that message. If the person who utters it is just a friend, then you would decode the message one way, but if the person who utters it is your significant other or someone you are romantically interested in, then you would decode the message another way. This speaks to the sociocultural relationship you have with the communicator, which adds a different layer to the content of the message.

Finally, communication is a process of adjustment. This speaks to the dynamic nature of communication. As we interact with people, competent communicators will adjust our communication style to be most successful and effective. If a very direct communication style is seen as most effective in our work place, then we would use that approach to be seen as competent in our professional environment. Once you get home and are communicating with your significant other, you may need to be less direct and more interpersonally attuned to your partner. Think about when you have had to ask for a favor from someone. You may start off with being quite direct and to the point, "May I have a ride to the mall?". If the person doesn't comply, you may then add, "I need to get a gift for my mother, and I'm unable to walk there since it's raining." If the person still doesn't want to give you a ride, then perhaps you would focus on the benefit that he/she may gain from

helping you. For instance, “if you take me, I’ll pay for gas and buy you lunch.” The point with this last postulate is that communication requires one to be dynamic – to switch gears if necessary to be accommodate the situation and the other communicator.